

Fact Sheet for **“Deaconess”**

Romans 16:1-2

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I have a tendency to think in boxes, and those boxes have a tendency not to touch one another. This week my box on sermons from 1 & 2 Timothy momentarily touched my box on calendar. The reaction was immediate. This Sunday is Mother's Day and my next sermon included these verses (1 Timothy 2:12-15). Wrong sermon for today! Instead I have chosen to look at our term “deaconess” beginning with Romans 16:1-2.

ESV ¹ ¶ **I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.**

There are some words in Greek that change spelling depending on whether they are referencing males or females. Here's one example from Titus 2:2-3... older men (*pres-by'-tes*) and older women (*pres-by'-tis*). Here's another example from Acts 2:18... male servants (*dou'-los*) and female servants (*dou'-le*).

However there are some Greek words that *do not* change spelling depending on whether they are referencing males or females. The word for “servant” (*di-a'-ko-nos*) in Romans 16:1 is one of those words. Now, all Greek nouns have gender... masculine, feminine, or neuter. And that gender is reflected in their spelling. This word for “servant” in Romans 16:1 has a masculine spelling, but it can refer to either males or females. Remember it is a word that *does not* change spelling depending on whether it is referencing a male or female. It is from the word “sister” in Romans 16:1 that we know Phoebe was clearly a woman. So here's what we have. This word for “servant”, a word that is always masculine in form, is referring to Phoebe, a woman.

But here's the big interpretive difficulty. This word for “servant” is also the word for the church office of “deacon.” So was Phoebe more than “a servant of the church at Cenchreae”? Did she hold the office of “deacon” in that church? Now we use the word “deaconess”, a word quite appropriate for our culture, but that word does not appear anywhere in the NT. It came about very early in church history. If Phoebe did indeed hold the office of “deacon” in that church, then it would be very appropriate for us to translate the word “servant” in Romans 16:1 by our word “deaconess.” That verse would then read **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae.”** But did Paul mean “servant” or “deacon” in Romans 16:1? With this verse there is absolutely no way to know for sure whether Paul was referring to “servant” or “deacon.” Your study bibles and commentaries may take one side or the other, even using words like “probably” or “likely.” But there is really no way to know for sure in this verse. But any full discussion of Romans 16:1-2 is always coupled with one verse in 1 Timothy 3, the only other verse in the NT that could be referring to a “deaconess.” In a couple of weeks we're going to be covering 1 Timothy 3 in much greater detail, but here are a few observations without supporting them now.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 lists qualifications for an overseer. Overseers are also called elders and pastors. Titus 1 also lists qualifications for this office. That church office is gender specific, open to men only. This statement is found in the declaration of faith of both our church and that of the Northwest Conservative Baptist Association. **“We believe the function of eldering is**

reserved for biblically qualified males.” This means that we are not open to having women pastors / elders / overseers.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 lists the qualifications for deacons. And those qualifications are only half as stringent as those for an overseer. But there is something else noteworthy in those verses that pertains to women. Verses 8-10 are clearly referring to males, as do verses 12-13. But verse 11, sandwiched in between, references females. It is a verse that is placed smack in the middle of the list of qualifications for “deacons.” The ESV begins verse 11 with “Their wives.”

“Their wives” translates a single Greek word. The KJV, NET, NKJV, and NLT all translate this word the same way. But the NASB and NIV translate this word as “women.” Why the difference? First, this word (*gy-ne'*) can be translated either way. And there are multiple examples of this in the NT. So which way should it be translated in 1 Timothy 3:11, “their wives” or “women?”

Here, in my thinking, are some critical observations.

1. If the correct translation is “their wives” in 1 Timothy 3:11 then a man’s wife also needs to meet certain qualifications in order for her husband to be qualified to be a deacon. Why then didn’t Paul list the qualifications for the wives of “overseers”, since those overseers have a greater role in the church? Shouldn’t their wives meet stricter standards than deacon’s wives?
2. If however the correct translation should be “women” then women can hold the office of deacon. Verse 11 would then give some qualifications for them.
3. Remember our earlier discussion of Romans 16:1-2? The word “deacon” is masculine in spelling but can refer to either men or women.
4. If the correct translation is “women” then a good cultural term for us is “deaconess”.

Again your study bibles and commentaries may take either position, but the above observations make it clear to me that 1 Timothy 3:11 references deaconesses.

Does this swing my understanding of Romans 16:1-2 and Phoebe? No, there is still not enough information to make an authoritative determination in that case.

Here is a good quote from Wayne Grudem, one of the translators of the ESV. “If deacons are actually functioning as elders and have the highest governing authority within a local church, then the arguments given above against women being elders would apply directly to this situation, and it would follow that Scripture does not permit women to be deacons in this sense. On the other hand, if deacons simply have delegated administrative responsibility for certain aspects of the ministry of the church, then there seems to be no good reason to prevent women from functioning as deacons.”¹

So, what roles can women have within the church? Well we need to take a look next Sunday at those verses I chose not to preach on today. After that we should have some fairly good guidelines to answer the question.

Here’s a tickler. For several years CBNW has been running Men’s Equipping retreats at Camp Tadmor. They will soon be adding Women’s Equipping retreats.

¹ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 944.